The Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt Recovery Project

Interview about Sarah Piatt with Dr. Geoffrey Smith by Dr. Elizabeth Renker
January 22, 2021 (Columbus, Ohio)

ER: Today I am in Columbus, Ohio. This is Professor Elizabeth Renker from the English department at The Ohio State University. And I have the great pleasure of talking with Geoff Smith, my colleague from Ohio State. He is Professor Emeritus of The Ohio State University Libraries and the former Head of the Rare Books & Manuscripts Library. And noting that the date is January 22, 2021, one of the things I'd like to mention in introducing Geoff and starting our interview is that almost exactly 20 years ago, Geoff and I started working together on Sarah Piatt and collecting materials related to her life and career. So I thought, for starters, Geoff, I would just ask you to recall: how did you first come to hear about Sarah Piatt?

GS: From you, when your interest started in it. And one of the truisms of collection development is—and *all* collections—you build upon strengths, because you just can't collect everything. So, you want to build upon those particular materials that traditionally have been a strength. In our case, we had the Charvat American Fiction Collection, which then was, later became the Charvat American Literature Collection, which is particularly strong in the 19th century. So when you begin looking at those terms, you say, well, we begin with this broad umbrella of American literature. Then we get into the 19th century, which is the greater strength of that collection. It is one of the strongest in the country for fiction. Then we realized that within our general collections, we had somehow, somewhere—this was before my time—received an outstanding collection of women poets from the 19th century. That was part of the impetus for changing the name of the Charvat Collection from "fiction" to "literature." And Sarah Piatt was a 19th-century American woman poet.

An analogous situation I can give you is the Hawthorne collection at Ohio State, which is different in the sense that it has multiple editions of *The Scarlet Letter* or *The Blithedale Romance* or the others, and it was established during the publishing of the compilation of the Nathaniel Hawthorne centenary edition under the auspices of The Center for Editions of American Authors of the Modern Language Association, and it was—many universities received different authors. Indiana had William Dean Howells, Clark University had James Fenimore Cooper, Stephen Crane was at Virginia. And I always thought Ohio State was just very fortunate to get Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of the real giants. Well, in your field, Melville was at The Newberry [Library] and working through Northwestern [University]. And in doing that, they were doing textual editions, so they had to get as many copies [of all the author's books] as they could, because of the traditions, or the way of printing in those days—that there were many changes made from printing to printing, and some of them could be quite significant. So we had that collection. And then, so you start with American literature and an American author and you have to concentrate on that author. So Sarah Piatt fell into that sort of model: we've got a lot of women's 19th-century American poetry, and why can't we just start specializing in that? Ultimately, I'll just take one step forward, which is somewhat

analogous yet: we end up getting manuscript collections of contemporary writers—now you're into papers— that will happen, that's *already* happening with Sarah Piatt. So that's taking that next step to get the papers, which makes it, in a strange way, even richer, or will be richer, than the Hawthorne collection. But the idea is that you just have a great depth of materials there. Also, as part of the mission statement—I'm not sure actually written as a mission statement, but in our heads—we were responsive to the state of Ohio. We are the state university, and that Ohio imprints or Ohio authors are always important to us. Coyle's *Ohio Authors* is one of our guidelines for collecting. So Sarah Piatt, again, fits that. One of the other missions of rare books and manuscripts is to, of any good special collections and libraries generally, is to try to fulfill the needs of resources for our faculty. So, Sarah Piatt sort of—to use the common phrase now—seemed to check all the boxes as to why we should pursue her. And then we have the connection with the Piatt Castles, and then Larry Michaels shows up. And I've just admired so much how the collection has developed, because we now have books donated by Larry Michaels, we have the Paula Bennett papers, all this research. So it's really becoming, as you will refer to, a center. And I think it'll also, beyond Sarah Piatt, and I think it'll have other cultural implications.

I'm currently reading *Abe* which is the new biography of Abraham Lincoln by David Reynolds. It's really magnificent. He refers to it as a "cultural biography." I hadn't really heard that phrase before, I thought most biographies were sort of cultural, but I guess as opposed to literary or the more factual type of biography. And in doing so, he's really pointing out the culture of Lincoln's upbringing that, you know, well, he didn't have that many books to read. In fact, that was quite a bit going on and newspapers were abounding, and he talks about when he—the types of books he was reading—and I know you know this, but maybe your audience won't—like primers and elocution books which, again with Jerry Tarver's collection [The Jerry Tarver Collection at The Ohio State University Libraries], contain wonderful selections of literature. So within those were biblical pieces, Shakespearean pieces, current poetry of the time. And Lincoln himself was a great reader of poetry and had apparently one of those wonderful memories—which I always admire in people because I don't have it—where they can read it and then just recite line after line after line. He could do that. So in the same way I think the Piatt will become like, it *is* a cultural collection. It also made me think, perhaps Lincoln read Piatt, that would be, you know, getting into the area of reading theory or, you know, who read these works. And I know you're all thinking of that and doing that, but *The Capital* [newspaper] is in Washington, DC. Was that actually—was that during the Civil War?

ER: Could you talk a little bit about *The Capital*, Geoff? I mean, that gets started in the early 70s.

GS: Okay, so—

ER: By Donn Piatt who is Sarah's husband's first cousin.

GS: Okay.

ER: Donn spelled with two n's, D-O-N-N. I'm mentioning this for our audience who might be unfamiliar, but yeah, you got this Washington, DC connection.

GS: And again, this, as we talked about—Sarah really—so for me it really wasn't a difficult decision. And because we also want to work with other organizations in the city, in the state. And so now we have the connection with the Piatt people and that was where *The Capital*, the original *Capital* was discovered. And Ohio State played its role in expediting in the digitization of it.

ER: Yes.

GS: So, it just keeps expanding. When I look at the Paula Bennett papers—it's research papers, but as with any major research project, she probably raises more questions to be answered. So you know, a graduate student coming into that collection will just say, "Well, she could have done more of this, and here are the materials right here to do it." I have to ask you. I remember that Paula Bennett also had an outstanding collection of Xerox materials of all American poetry. Is that still there, or did that ever come to Ohio State?

ER: Well, you know, I'm still in very close touch with Paula, of course she's thrilled by what has become of her papers at Ohio State and is a big supporter of our collections. The last time I visited her she was cleaning out closets and giving me boxes of stuff to bring back. So she has added multiple binders of Piatt-related stuff to what she originally donated. She also gave us an amazing collection of early lesbian zines from Cambridge in the 1970s and that of course, has gone into our LGBTQ zines collection. She is not ready yet to hand over all her other photocopies of women poets, but they will come to us someday. But you're right. Yes, well, that's other that very valuable research of Paula's that you and I have been talking about for a long time, and she is very glad, as with the zines, to know that it's going to have a good home.

GS: Yeah, we have talked about them. I'm very glad to hear that, because, again, it adds to this cultural collection. And another analogous situation: we have the Hilandar Research Collection here at Ohio State, which are microfilms of medieval Slavic manuscripts from Mount Athos in Greece. And people are like, "Yeah, well, a microfilm collection." Yeah, except they're the *only* copies in the Western Hemisphere.

ER: Yes.

GS: And in fact, Mount Athos had a major fire where things were damaged, so in fact, they may be the only text—not original material—but the only text available.

ER: Yeah.

GS: Yeah, what Paula did, as I remember it, is go through reams and reams of newspapers and you don't even know if those are still in existence. So they are copies, but they are the text. So

it just, it will make that collection, the collection will become bigger than Piatt in its own way. She'll always be the core of it, you know, you always have the core focus as we do with our other collections. But it's a wonderful situation. So we get back to the original question, it was very easy to take that tack with it, everything fit. I suppose I look at that as like really a model for collection development and it just happened, I happened to be there. I'd like to say that hopefully anyone who was in the seat at that time would have done the same thing.

ER: One thing I remember us doing, though, I don't think I have an exact record of the date, is I remember, you drove the two of us out to Piatt Castles one day. We met with Margaret Piatt. I'll mention for our audience that, at that time, there were two castles out in West Liberty, Ohio, known as the Piatt Castles. And they were famous not because of Sarah Piatt, but they were owned by brothers Donn and Abram Piatt, and very unusual, because, just sitting in the middle of Ohio, there were these two stone castles that the brothers had built. And basically, it was a tourist destination. But very steeped in Ohio history and it's recorded in your AAA guide, and stuff like that. And Geoff and I very early on connected with Margaret Piatt. She'll also be doing an interview in this series. And so I think, Geoff, that was one of the first things we did after we started talking with Paula Bennett about her papers.

GS: It was early.

ER: Yeah, it was early.

GS: And speaking of that, I *was* surprised that the castle, which is the more famous one, Donn Piatt's family, his brother, I think. [Donn Piatt was the brother of Abram Piatt and the first cousin of J.J. Piatt, Sarah's husband.] That they had 60,000 visitors a year, which really surprised me. I mean, I think that speaks just to the significance of the Piatt name in the state of Ohio.
Well, then the other thing is that, the final thing, is that Sarah Piatt is really worthy of this.

ER: Yes.

GS: And then I'm not a scholar to speak to that part of it, but I certainly have read some of her poetry and I was very impressed. I can't remember the exact poem, and I'm only going to paraphrase it because I don't have that gift like Lincoln—

ER: [laughs]

GS: And it dealt with, you know, some talk—like the plantation school, where old timers would say like, "Why can't we go back to that time?" A *Gone with the Wind* type thing.

ER: Yeah.

GS: And it was a poem, she said something that just moved me, that so that, you know, because of the war, so that "everyone could rise up and die again." And I thought, yeah, let

everybody die twice. What a wonderful thought that is! And it gives me goosebumps now. I don't know if I'm phrasing it clearly enough that you can remember what poem it is.

ER: Yeah, I think you're talking about the poem called "Another War." So what I'm going to do is here in the background of our talk, I'm just going to pull out the poem and read you a couple of lines and see if based on that basis if this seems to be the one you're talking about. This is one where, as in many of Piatt's poems, the poem's premise is that the person speaking in the poem who turns out to be a mother, and she's having a conversation with her child. And they're watching soldiers marching, and the kid is so impressed with the uniforms and so on, that he says, "Can we have another war?" Because he's attracted to the romance. And she says, "Another *war*?" Is that the one you're thinking of, Geoff?

GS: Maybe. The impression I had was the idea of that the dead would become alive again and would die again.

ER: Yes.

GS: Or maybe it's her memories of it. But it goes back to what Larry is talking about in your interview with him about the voice, seemingly the domestic voice or whatever, but it's just so dark and telling, and really dealing with major issues.

ER: Yeah.

GS: That's the struggle, as you know, with most 19th-century American women poets, is that they're constrained and have to make their points through innuendo and irony and that sort of thing.

ER: Well, I thought, maybe since, you know, one of the really fun things about these interviews is that our listeners who aren't familiar with Piatt's poems, when during these conversations, people bring up favorite poems, it's really fun to pull them out and read a few lines and people give a sense of what—So I pulled out another one, Geoff, too, that I think maybe also—and this is nice because it's taking us into all these, one of Piatt's topics, one of her many compelling topics, and this one being the war and the aftermath. One of my claims about Piatt is that she's also a great poet of Reconstruction. Reconstruction has been basically ignored in American literary history until very recently. This is one aspect of her career that—that needs to be read much more carefully. But there's another one, Geoff, called "There Was a Rose." And the speaker of the poem is listening to someone who is romanticizing the war. The poem was published in 1873 in *The Capital*. And the speaker is listening to someone romanticize and reminisce about the war, and she says she wants to go back. And she says she wants to go back to the world that it was then, and a million marching men from the North and South would arise and the dead would have to die again.

GS: That's it! That's the one.

ER: Yeah.

GS: Chilling, isn't it?

ER: Yeah, exactly. I mean, I actually got goosebumps just now talking about it. Yeah.

GS: You look at Gettysburg or Appomattox. Not Appomattox, but oh, the other major one: Antietam. And think of the, you know, the rivers ran with blood. Yeah, let's do that again. Isn't that a nice thought. Boy, it's a piercing picture.

ER: Yeah.

GS: Yeah, so that was the final, I mean, that just fit in with everything else. Well, she's also a darn good poet.

ER: Yeah, yeah.

GS: And you address this with the other interviewees, that there seems to be a period of rediscovery. Well, you know, the famous Melville story with Raymond Weaver, I think. 1920, from Princeton, suddenly: "Hey, this guy is one of our great writers." He had languished for years. And Emily Dickinson. And we don't know how many others, but it's scholars like yourself and Larry and Paula that are bringing this to the attention of the literary community.

ER: Now, maybe to return to another topic you raised already, because I think one of the things, those of those of us working on Sarah are aware of, is what is the current status in our society of reading poetry, just for enjoyment. When poetry has developed a reputation for being kind of abstracted and academic, you know, how do you get people to read a recently discovered poet. You mentioned the Charvat Collection and the component of it that included women poets. Can you talk at all about that collection and whether it got used and where it came from? Are these things that you could talk about for a few minutes?

GS: Yeah, it probably hasn't been used as much as it should be, because I don't think that 19th-century American women poets have had the attention that they should have. And I think that will change. And it was there before I came, and unfortunately can't remember the name of the donor.

ER: Is it Tuttle, by any chance? The Tuttle Collection?

GS: It *does* sound—was that—at Ohio?

ER: There *is* something called the Tuttle Collection, which, if I recall correctly, we got in the 1950s or something like that and it's—

GS: That's probably it, then.

ER: Okay.

GS: And provenance notes weren't part of the record in those days, so a lot of that disappears, and we can talk about that later.

ER: Yeah.

GS: But, so within that, whatever reason it was, and if you find out who Tuttle is, you had, you know, the Cary sisters, you had Lucy Larcom, Elizabeth Stoddard. They were all there.

ER: Yeah.

GS: So many of them. And so, that was in our general collections. And one of the initiatives we took after we started with the Piatt was to transfer those to Rare Books, or the William Charvat American Literature Collection. So suddenly, it wasn't just Piatt, we had this wonderfully well-designed collection. Someone who knew what he was doing, or she, I don't even know if Tuttle was a man or a woman. And it wasn't comprehensive, but it was extensive. So again, we had that core that really makes us, you know, not for American poetry, but just American 19th-century studies. And it was nice that we're able to, that the books didn't disappear. And again, as I'll say, I don't think it's getting the attention should, but it will get more when perhaps people start thinking of Piatt and what her relation is to these other writers, and who *are* these other writers and, you know, just viewing them—as you mentioned Reconstruction, which, considering what has happened in our capital of late speaks well—

ER: Yes.

GS: …to a very difficult time.

ER: Oh gosh, think about the poem, Geoff, I mean, "Another War," right?

GS: Right. By the way, you do know that the Republican Party, Lincoln's party, is now the Democratic Party, and the Democratic Party is now the Republican Party. You can't use names for parties anymore without having some sort of historical experience.

ER: Yes, right. Now another thing, you know, that would be really helpful to our listeners. I've found that when I have conversations with people about recovering Piatt, people often, when they ask me, you know, what am I doing in my work, and I explain, I'm writing a biography of a recently rediscovered poet, they always have a lot of questions about that. What does that mean: "recently rediscovered?" Why would she be rediscovered? And then when I say her name, they say, "I'm sorry, I've never heard of her." And I say, "There's no reason to be sorry—she fell out of our culture for a long time." But, you know, there's this tremendous energy for recovering women writers and people are interested in that more generally. They

like—I find they like to hear stories about what I call the detective elements of my research. Like, they don't really connect with the fact that you can't just Google a topic and find the information that you need. So, I try to give them practical examples of what it means to actually have to do the ground-level work to recover someone who fell out of history.

GS: Yeah.

ER: And they like those stories. One thing, though, that I think also that a lot of our listeners don't have a practical familiarity with, is, how does the concept of a special collections or a rare books and manuscripts, these different kinds of terms, right? "Special collections," "rare books and manuscripts": what are those and what role do they play in a project like this? Like, okay, who is Sarah Piatt, and let's bring her back. If you can just get into some examples, like the guts of that job as you did it, I think that would be really clarifying for people.

GS: Okay, well, "special collections" is the broader term. And when we use "rare books" it's literally what it says. Books, they have more artifactual value or as much artifactual value as tomes of knowledge, in that some of them are hardly ever touched at all. "Special collections" goes beyond that, in that you might have 20th-century materials, *21st*-century materials—I keep forgetting [laughs] we're way into the next century. For instance, Stephen King. Why do you have Stephen King? Well, because we have a core collection of American fiction, but that, you know, we're building for the future. So special collections, and they're not rare because there's hundreds of thousands of copies, but it's part of the comprehensive collecting of it that makes it a *special* collection. And then within that, you have your Hawthornes, your Piatts, your Raymond Carver's manuscripts, and other manuscripts, the [William S.] Burroughs. And that is what really provides, I think, more of the research value. Because you can look at—I know, and I do textual scholarship, and it *is* important to have the original editions for clarity, for making sure that you can provide people with all possible choices of reading that they might have from a single text, like *The Scarlet Letter*. But for the most part, for most scholars, they can read a Norton Critical Edition, that's fine, you don't really need the book. Special collections provides that extra stuff, when we talk about people doing research for dissertations and books and such. I couldn't even give a percentage, but there's so much of the archival world, which is just unexplored at this point, and it's as far as "Well, it's all available digitally." No, it's not, because the costs of doing it are outrageous. Priorities are made within each library, and unless you have an advocate, a supporter for doing that, it's not going to happen. And then whoever was in the seat or are in charge of the collection at one time retires or dies, moves on, and they lose that advocate, and the papers just disappear. And one thing that can occur, which, you know, when you're developing a collection—a phrase I always disliked, was, curators say, "*my* collection." That's *not* your collection. You're doing it for your current faculty, your current students and what, as best you can perceive as, interest to future scholars. And there's a tendency of some people just to build collections on what *they* like, and I don't think that's good, because when they're gone, who cares, you know? Like, I built this wonderful collection of some great, just someone who's not really significant, but this person really liked it and wasted—well, I won't say—I think, invested poorly their resources that they should have been thinking of the larger academic community

at that time. So that's sort of, you know, what we do. It's fun. You're able to spend lots of money, and Ohio State was always very generous to us. And so we got some magnificent collections, and so that's the fun part. Now in my case, you know, American fiction *is* my area, but I wasn't building the collection for myself. It's just fortunate that there was a melding of my interests and the collections. Part of the reason I was hired was because I had that specialty.

ER: Okay, so let's try to pull into some examples for our listeners about what this meant with Sarah Piatt, when you got your eye on her as an important figure. So, what are some of the things that, as the head of the Rare Books & Manuscripts Library at that time, you would say, "Okay, this is an important author for us to have our eyes on." Okay, so what happens next? What do you do if you're in the world of special collections?

GS: Well, you identify the corpus and create a finding—well, you create your original record, but you also create a desiderata list. This is where Larry and yourself and everyone was so important, influential in saying, "Well, these are the works." And I could find it myself, too, but you've given me other, additional things and related items that we then can go out to our rare book dealers and say we're looking for this sort of stuff. And they come up with surprising things. And, you know, and people *do* collect just Americana, which doesn't seem important to some people, they seem minor, but it's—none of that's ever minor, because it's right of the moment, and it may have points of view or ideas, theories and such, which are, can be repugnant. But still, it's part of the history, part of the literary history. And so, we can then, you know, have our dealers looking for that. I'm not sure if I'm exaggerating this, but we had major monies at one time, when I first came here, federal funds to buy lots and lots of American fiction. It was like $200,000, and this was in 1983, which is a lot of money. And they were selling for—we went down to Acres of Books in Cincinnati, which is now no longer there, and just, it was early, we're doing American fiction 1921-1925, and we're just pulling out books for $1.00, $2.00. So, we were buying a lot.

ER: Wow.

GS: What I'm leading to is, though, if you spread that list to everyone, you can actually artificially inflate the market. So it's generally preferable to find your trusted dealers, and those who specialize in that area, and limit that the number that you work with, so that—because in some cases, there'll be looking to buy from other dealers, and so every time there's an exchange there, they're marking it up for you. I may be exaggerating that, but I think it *can* happen. And so that's, we did that, as well with American fiction, and with Piatt.

ER: Now one thing you and I talked about numerous times over the years. It was you—I remember, checking in with you about this, and you saying to me that you found it very puzzling that the dealers were not turning up books by Sarah Piatt.

GS: Yeah.

ER: As someone who published, you know, 18 books and you said you were surprised that there weren't more hits. Do you have any reflections on that? I mean, let's make sure our listeners understand that, for an author like this that pretty much nobody has heard of, nobody really has any reason to collect this person. I mean, unless you're just collecting general items, right?

GS: Right.

ER: Nobody was really looking for books by Sarah Piatt and so it's not until she becomes a better-known author that the prices will go up.

GS: Yes.

ER: And that people will start cataloging by her name, right?

GS: And especially when you come out with bibliographies and anthologies, and you now have checklists to work with. And people, a lot of collectors work with checklists, your outstanding collectors want to be completists. They want *everything* of that person. And that just wasn't the case at that time. I think we go back to the general issue that 19th-century American women's poetry was not prominent, and the dealers really want to sell books. It's a business. And so—and they might very well have had a lot of that in their stock, but it hadn't been recorded.

ER: Interesting, right.

GS: The traditional sort of book barn that I've seen, been to many, you know, literally barns just full of books. They don't know it's there. Then suddenly, "Well, wait a minute. We have some old 19-century—let's go through there." So they start, they *will* start to emerge.

ER: Right.

GS: You never know where things are going to be. We just talked about Clintonville and this is related to collecting, not to Piatt. But I got a phone call one day from a woman on Lakeview, right on the other, on the west side, and—I don't think there's a lake to view, but it's called Lakeview—and she said she had some old, religious works. And that's one of the more common: "We have an old bible from 1900." And it's like, well, it's not really an old bible. Well, then she started with some dates like 1521, and it turns out that the collection she was talking about belonged to a woman who had been the son of a Lutheran minister who had been at Capital [University] and these books had been passed down—I guess, the first son becoming a minister somewhere in the 19th century, came over the United States, and the collection at this point, was in Arizona. I went out personally to get it.

ER: You went to Arizona?

GS: Went out there and it was in a mobile home park in the desert.

ER: Oh my god.

GS: They had it appraised out about $40,000 worth of Reformation materials, which again, we have a fantastic Reformation collection. So this is just to point out that you don't know where anything is. You start going through the mobile homes in the Arizona desert, you know—

ER: She had a 16th-century Bible?

GS: Yeah. Well, and she had Luther works. Yeah, so it was—

ER: [laughs] Holy cow.

GS: And that's not your area, but you know that we have that great Luther collection.

ER: Yes, absolutely.

GS: Reformation.

ER: Oh my gosh, wow.

GS: Yeah.

ER: A mobile home in Arizona.

GS: It was funny. I bore your audience with this, but the only thing she said, was that she didn't want any acknowledgement.

ER: Wow.

GS: She wanted to be anonymous. I thought—because people give you paperbacks and they want their name to be etched into the walls. [laughs]

ER: Yeah.

GS: She said—So well, we'd like to, but she said, "No, please don't."

ER: Interesting. Wow.

GS: I imagine, she was the last—she had been adopted, and she was the last of the line. No other—so this if she hadn't given them to us, I don't know what would have happened.

ER: So what was the connection with Lakeview, if she was in Arizona?

GS: Oh, no, this is a friend of hers.

ER: Oh, I see. Okay.

GS: Yeah, "I'll call Ohio State and see if there's any interest." So again, word of mouth.

ER: Wow. Yeah. But taking us back to Piatt, of course, what this means—an author that pretty much no one has heard about, but who published widely in newspapers, magazines, and book form. There is probably a lot of stuff out there and people just don't understand that what they have has acquired a new type of value.

GS: Right. And again, the locality that, because she *was* an Ohio writer, and had family and friends in Ohio, you would expect that there might be a good number of books in our own state.

ER: Yes.

GS: There's so many old homes with just these old bookcases full of books.

ER: Yeah. So one question about when you got all this started, I don't think I've ever asked you this. And the question probably has returned to me recently, returned to my thinking. Since we had, you know, all those acres of books, let's say, where you're just collecting widely in the 19th century: do you happen to recall—when you started getting interested in Sarah Piatt in particular—did our library already have some or her volumes on the shelves? Do you recall that? I don't remember.

GS: I believe we did. I think we had some there, but they were probably some in, if it is the Tuttle Poetry Collection, I'm sure there were some, but we were, they were sparse.

ER: Yeah.

GS: We didn't have as many as we could have, considering what she's become.

ER: And it did take us quite a while, as you were saying—at the time the book dealers were coming up empty. It did take us quite a while to fill out our collection of first editions. In fact, we just found one this year that had been missing.

GS: That's great.

ER: Yeah. So I think there's only one more that we still need to acquire.

GS: Well, that's terrific. And now, of course, you have to get multiples, because she's, you're concentrating on her, and doing textual work. You have to get multiple copies of things.

ER: Yes, exactly.

GS: I don't think that's something that much the public don't understand. Why do you have to have multiple copies? To come up with the pure text. That doesn't mean much. And administrators don't always see it that way, either. I won't get into that. I was going to remark upon the direction that the Piatt Collection took.

ER: Yeah, would love to hear your thoughts.

GS: Well, when I came to Ohio State, we were compiling a database of American fiction, and that caused me to get connected with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who was at Duke University at the time, and he was doing the Black Periodical Literature Project. So I became part of their advisory board. And what he was doing was the same thing, because so much of the African American literature was in periodical form. There were some books, but they didn't have the same access as white authors did. So what they had done, and it turned into one of the great literary projects, is to go out, as Paula did, and get copies of all the old—as many Black periodicals as they could find, and there were a lot of them. They weren't publishing books, but they were publishing a lot of periodicals. So that provided a good late 20th-century model of using technology and such to gather these materials and make them known. And I would say probably consciously we imitated that.

ER: Well, you know, that's a very interesting point and I think it comes back to helping our audience to understand the importance of special collections. I know that when I teach undergraduates and graduate students, they really—and it's no fault of their own, it just makes sense. I mean, they have a difficult time understanding what these resources are for, which is why the practical experience is so important. So, given what you've just been saying about the Henry Louis Gates projects, I mean, one thing that I can say about the Piatt materials we've collected—and I'd love to hear your thoughts about this, too—is that the current uses of a lot of those materials, I think, have shifted from when you and I first started working on this. So, one example I'll use is: you remember that we started with Paula Bennett's research papers, and since then we've added a lot of other pieces to the collection. But one of the things that Paula had done as a function of the time period in which she was doing her research, is she had made photocopies of all of Sarah's published books. Because people who wanted to work on that material couldn't reliably get it, it had to be on your library shelf, you had to luck out.

GS: Yeah.

ER: And then Google Books hit as a project. Now, I remember when we were doing Google Books at Ohio State. Can you talk a little bit about that moment, what that meant for libraries?

GS: Well, it's a tremendous moment, and it particularly was significant for the rare books because they—it turns out that Ohio State had a number of unique copies or rare copies. Our

concern was the treatment of the books. I mean, it's great to have the copies made, but you don't want to destroy the original in doing the copy. So, they actually took us, had us up there, they had an Ann Arbor outlet [laughs] and this is a humorous—very secretive, you weren't supposed to know it was there. It was this unmarked building. Got in the building, there was the big multicolored Google neon logo and had, you know, and it was just bustling. I had firsthand experience of seeing how they have all these food supplies, they had cereals and good food for their employees and this and that. And then they went down, they showed us how they were doing it, just flipping, flipping, flipping. And they proved to us that they were being very careful with it. But we tried to institute as much quality control as we could. I mean, while the books were sort of graded before they left and then graded when they came back to see if there was any damage done. So if nothing else, we'd get some compensation. But yeah, that was a wonderful project. And some people resented it or resisted it because they thought, well, now, people won't use our books. You want them to be used. I mean, if it's remotely. There's always a reason for someone who's going to have to look at the books originally. I can give you an example of a case where someone was studying correspondence from the Caribbean during the yellow fever period.

ER: Oh, wow. Great.

GS: You know, official materials and that, which were heavily edited, censored—you know. But he learned that it would be the smell of certain treatments of medicines and such, because they were all in that area, they had to be, like today's pandemic, they were treating them. I forget what it was, like, not quinine, but something that had a distinctive smell. So he had to see the letters and smell them.

ER: Oh my gosh.

GS: So he could get that medicinal smell. He knew that they were, you know, treated in some way and were probably very censored. And that's a minor example, but sometimes, there's always odd reasons to have to see the original work.

ER: Wow. Yeah.

GS: Yeah, I sometimes I think libraries treat themselves too much as a business and that it's not all to just, you know, keep things hidden. The fact that modern rare books and special collections' theory of usage has really gone—this has been going on for 50 years, now—but demystification. It used to be that, you know, only certain people could see these materials, and that you couldn't touch them, and all of these restrictions, whereas that's changed a lot, and Google is just another extension of that. I don't think it's a surprising thing, when we would apply for grants, that the major granting agency was preservation and access, which really, is all there is to libraries, preserving. In other words, having the materials and providing access, and that's what you do.

ER: Okay, so we went down a couple of different avenues here. But let's go back to where this part of the conversation started, which was: you make a commitment to start collecting these materials, and then one of the questions I asked was: what are the steps? And you said, "Well, the first thing you do is you make a list of all the publications and try to acquire them." In a case like ours, where we were dealing with someone's papers, and someone's papers about somebody else, what are the practicalities of getting that stuff? It's not like you say to a dealer, "Go get me Paula Bennett's papers." So, can you tell us how this works, practically?

GS: Well now we're in the, seeking the good graces of our faculty who have the connections and the networks of who has what and who's doing what. As you know, that there could be years of research, the book's not out yet, but there's still years of research there. And research collections, I think, *are* important. That, first of all, they're collected in an intellectually determined way. You know, there's a path, there's a coherence to them. I'm not expressing this well, but it's just explaining things that other people may not explain as well. And it's not your standard book that has gone under the pen of editors or publishers who say, "Well, that's too much, got to take it out." There's a lot of unpublished stuff that comes out of these research collections, which, in many cases, is why we have them. And, well, you know, we have the Hawthorne edition papers, which is, I think, it's ripe for someone to do something wonderful with them.

ER: That's a great idea. Yeah, it's the behind-the-scenes stuff that doesn't get in print. And it's also, again, going back to what I was saying earlier about the misunderstandings people have about you just have to do a Google search and you turn everything up. And this is stuff that there was no trace of on the web anywhere. And there's only one copy of it, right? There's only copy. Unless you go to Ohio State to see the behind-the-scenes editorial stuff on the Hawthorne edition, there is nowhere else in the world where you're going to find that.

GS: Mentioning further the Google project, at least I don't remember it, I don't think we sent any papers, it was all book material.

ER: Yeah.

GS: A book project, for a couple of reasons. First of all, the paper materials are ephemera, and much more vulnerable, and much harder to control. Can you imagine sending up a bunch of, well, say if we had Hawthorne letters, someone might take out—you send out 500 letters and you'd have to count them when they come back and is one missing. Where is it? Did it fly out of the truck? Yeah, so those materials do remain unique.

ER: Yes. So, a good example, I think, for our listeners of what we're talking about, is: current users—unlike, you know, back in the early 2000s—current users don't need quite as much to use Paula's photocopies of all the books, because you *can* find most of them on Google Books now. But there are other kinds of papers in there, again, that exists nowhere else in the world. There is nowhere else. They are unique copies, we have them here at Ohio State, and that's it. That's the only one. So, you know, Paula did things like, she did much more

extensive photocopying of Piatt poems, as you're saying, from all kinds of newspapers and magazines, that are collected nowhere else. And her published edition of Piatt is a selected edition, so it's only a handful of those poems.

GS: The other thing is that the Google project is *a* book. And there are many copies of that book, some of which will have annotations and markings that the copy you see doesn't have. In getting back to reader theory, if in fact, you had a book owned by Mark Twain, a Piatt book owned by Mark Twain with jottings in it, or even just check marks off. Finding out what *he* found interesting in that. Now, that's a different example, but we do—I can give a real example. We have a copy of *The Great Gatsby* which was a copy owned by William S. Burroughs, which has all these little marks inside—

ER: Oh, that's fantastic. Wow.

GS: If students are looking for projects, have them look at that and say, "Burroughs and Fitzgerald. What was Burroughs taking from this?"

ER: Yeah.

GS: And again, that's an example of, with all the Piatt materials, I'm sure that among all the photocopied materials that Paula has, that there had to have been some that had markings and she must have made some provenance notes. Those are things that won't show up elsewhere.

ER: Yes. Yeah, good point. And you don't know whose copies she was photocopying, you know, to whom it belonged. Like you said, there might be a signature in there. Another—

GS: You would suspect, that being in Washington with *The Capital* such that Donn would have distributed copies of her poems to dignitaries that he knew. I mean, that, so he might have had James Garfield…

ER: Yeah, my—

GS: …Ulysses S. Grant.

ER: My colleague in Piatt research, Sean Andres, will be doing an interview with us, again, doing an interview with us in this series. Sean is a non-academic researcher who also has made some very major discoveries in Piatt research. And one of his special areas in the Piatt recovery which is extremely valuable, is he's—again because Piatt has not been collected by other repositories concertedly until Ohio State entered the scene—what he's been doing is going after likely correspondents of the Piatts and looking in their papers.

GS: Yeah.

ER: Which is a great way to come at it, because they, as you know, they corresponded with so many cultural figures of the age. And unfortunately, my trip that was planned for last summer in Washington, DC to get on some of this stuff was canceled. But the connections that they had with figures in the Lincoln administration…

GS: Mmhmm.

ER: …there is *no* question there's going to be stuff there in those people's papers. I mean, Salmon Chase gave J.J. his job at the Treasury. You know, and I've just recently realized after seeing the name in a number of places that—I'm going to ask you to check the index of the biography you're reading—that one of Lincoln's secretaries was a close friend of J.J's. A fellow poet.

GS: I'm going to make a note of that.

ER: Yeah. I'll hit you up on private email about that to check the index. I just read a different biography of Lincoln and I was checking the index, but I'm going ask you to check yours.

GS: Again, that's what scholars do. I always go, look for names, see who has the most entries.

ER: It's another good example for our listeners, right? About why everything is not just summarized already for you in a book.

GS: An adjunct to what we're talking about is the history of scholarship itself, which is a vibrant field. And this is a study of Piatt scholarship. But I think, I love reading books about scholars. And when you talk to Larry, *The Scholar Adventurers*, well that's you know, an homage to Richard Altick, that great book which, I just, I reread that frequently.

ER: I remember you being such a fan of Altick, yeah. So I thought I'd give our listeners an example of, another concrete example of how the meaning of the Bennett collection, that you worked on acquiring for us, how it—how now another component of it has become exceptionally important 20 years later. Maybe that would be interesting. And you and I could talk about that, because you collected this stuff. And I don't think you and I have had a chance to catch up about what's happening with it now. So just as I said, like the photocopies of books are still important, but they're not as urgent as they were prior to Google Books. Now that we've digitized several of the newspapers that Sarah's poems appeared in regularly, *The Capital* in Washington, DC and *The New York Ledger* in New York, we've started to turn more concertedly to *The Louisville Daily Journal*, where she was publishing before she was Sarah Piatt, when she was the unknown young woman living in her native Kentucky, and *The Louisville Daily Journal* was the most important newspaper of the West, and she's getting published there at the age of 18. Now, this is an *incredibly* rare newspaper. Okay, I've spent tons of time hunting for this newspaper in print copies or digitized copies, and you just cannot find it. So, I have a lot more work to do about that, but the part I want to connect with our viewers about, with our listeners about, is that: the only repository in the world that has a

relatively extensive microfilm copy of *The Louisville Daily Journal* is in Louisville, the Free Public Library. No one has a print run that we know of, unless it's in somebody's attic. There is no extensive print run of this newspaper in the world. And the *only* place that has extensive microfilm is this one library. And they don't lend the microfilm. So again, this is the kind of—yeah, go on.

GS: I mean, microfilm, as I remember, is a very easy to digitize. But that's again, a project that a public library, they want to buy CDs and films and popular literature for their constituency, their patrons. And the idea, well, "Let's spend a few million dollars doing these microfilm, when, well, in fact, we've got the microfilm." I do want to note, don't you think, the person who made the microfilm. And that's a—

ER: Well, here, this is what I wanted, I wanted to run this by you, with your expertise, and see your thoughts. Okay, so I've been in touch with them to borrow the microfilm, which is not allowed right now. They have no plans to digitize it, probably for the reasons you're saying—it's not an, it's not a top agenda item for them as a free public library. But what this means is that short of actually going to Louisville and using their microfilm, anybody who wants to work on this earliest important stage of Piatt's career can go to *our* special collections because Paula Bennett made copies of the microfilm poems.

GS: Oh, see, that's a perfect example. And again, I'll refer to the Black Periodical Fiction Project, that there's a lot more out there than people realize. And yeah, it's the *text*, it's not the original.

ER: Yes, it's a good example of what you said, why someone's papers—I mean, Paula never published those. Right? But the way you get them, you go to our special collections library at Ohio State and you can look at those. Or you have to drive to Louisville to use the microfilm. And, you know, boy, again, off camera, Geoff, if you could ever figure out how I could [laughs] move forward with this digitization project. That's my predicament right now. And they don't have any record of the provenance. They don't know where they got the microfilm, so I can't go to the source, even.

GS: And that again, that's one of the sad histories that provenance notes weren't kept as closely as they are today. Part of our standard record is to put in a provenance note—I say, "*our* record." Ohio State's record. That's only relatively recent.

ER: Yes, someone had the newspaper for them to make the microfilm, right? And by now, maybe that's vanished. Maybe it was an old newspaper and they got rid of it. I don't know. Any thoughts? Any guesses about that situation?

GS: I mean, Nicholas [Nicholson] Baker came out—

ER: Oh, I remember. Yeah.

GS: —with *Double Fold*. And really chastised the library community for getting rid of materials. In some ways, he was correct, that you want to commend people for making the microfilm, but then curse them for throwing the materials away afterwards thinking that you don't need them. I would just guess that the storage of it alone, when you calculate costs and library maintenance, there's always a formula for how much it costs for every cubic foot of space. And how many people really are going to look at these old newspapers? And even under the best of conditions, they probably, if someone looks at it once, they're going to do serious damage to it. So, it becomes a cost factor. And Nicholas Barker—is it Barker or Baker? [Nicholson Baker]—one of the distinguished rare book people in England, they have basically the same name, one's Barker, one's Baker. I think it's Baker. But he tried to do that, he did buy a storage facility, but it just became overwhelming for him. And expensive, very expensive.

ER: It's helpful to remind people about that. One thing that makes me wonder—and this is pure speculation, I want to make sure our audience doesn't think this is fact by any means—but it makes me wonder if maybe *they* originally held the print newspaper and made microfilm in the interest of storage and then disposed of the paper.

GS: That might have been, that they made their own. Absolutely.

ER: So anyway, that's a good example, I mean, of what you were saying earlier. Why, one example of why someone's personal research papers could hold something that is really a rare gem. And it's essential now to our understanding of Piatt's early career and the records are sparse and this is one of the few places you can get stuff that you desperately need to understand her earliest poems.

GS: And, as I said, the study of scholarship itself. How does a scholar go about her task?

ER: Yes. Now, what would you, what would be your thoughts, Geoff, about at this point in time with the collections having evolved to where they are, given where we are in cultural history, would you have any thoughts or suggestions about things to think about in the Piatt-related collections for the future? The present and the future?

GS: Well, it would be identifying, as you mentioned, people that they knew and, you've already mentioned the letters and such. And beginning to expand to include the works of her associates, acquaintances, literary connections. I'm not sure if they exist, but if there are any publishing, printing records of the, you know, the famous Ticknor and Fields cost books, which was of immeasurable importance to a lot of scholars studying the print history of Nathaniel Hawthorne and others. Yeah, just expanding on a cultural level.

ER: The papers of all those editors who published her and their newspapers.

GS: Because it does, Sarah Piatt—this is sort of like cribbing from the Lincoln book. Yeah, she lived within a culture, and the poems are enriched by understanding that culture better.

ER: Yeah. I love your question about, would Lincoln have known about her and her work, that's a great—

GS: If you think about it more, Lincoln was from Kentucky, and in fact, when he went—I'm just at that point in the biography—when he went to Washington as the representative for his one term in the House of Representatives, went and *stayed* in Louisville [Lexington], and visited Mary Todd's family. So, it's very likely that Lincoln would have read the Louisville paper. I think would almost be impossible that he didn't.

ER: And Mary Todd, that connection, too, being from Lexington. You know, she is roughly of the generation of Sarah's mother, who was also from the Lexington area.

GS: And also, anti-slavery—

ER: Yeah, that social world is, right, connected.

GS: Because within that culture— I have the advantage, at this point, having just read this—but that, they had a lot of people from Kentucky going to Illinois because they were anti-slavery. Of course, you had a lot of people in Illinois who are pro-slavery. So, Sarah Piatt was in that group. She was, not an abolitionist, but anti-slavery. And so the connection she would have had of the other of that social group would be really important to see.

ER: Yeah, it is fascinating. And you know, I want to come back, if we can for a minute, to questions about how libraries acquire things, this whole mystery for general readers. It's kind of mysterious how these collections come into being. And I thought I would use an example from my own research, which is a very large collection of family papers housed in Sterling Library at Yale University. And this collection is called the Piatt Family Papers, and it's important to state that this collection does not exist in any way because of Sarah Piatt. They had never heard of her, she's not listed in the finding aid. You know, it's an incredibly useful collection for me as a Piatt scholar, because of course my assumption is, there's going to be a ton of family information in there that's relevant to her. And in fact, there *are* letters from her in there, including in folders called things like "unknown" or "miscellaneous manuscripts." Which is one of the fun things about collections, right, Geoff? You look in those—those are always my favorite folders, and there's all kinds of stuff in there.

GS: Yeah, you never know.

ER: Yeah, so, what the collection is, it's a collection of thousands of pages of family correspondence among the family members of Sarah's husband, J.J. Okay, and it begins with J.J.'s father, the patriarch, John Bear Piatt, who had many children who fanned out across the United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, and it's all their correspondence. So it's a fantastic historical record. But also, there's a lot of stuff in there related to Sarah and J.J. and their family relationship. So it's a gold mine for Piatt scholarship. So my question for you, Geoff, and I know that there's no way you can know what the facts are in the case of this

collection, but I'd love to hear your guesses or your hunches based on what I tell you. So, again: 3,000 pages. And when you look at the Yale University, the description of the collection, all it says is: "Part gift of Howard S. Mott, 1954." Now when I was visiting this collection, I asked the librarians to please check and see if there was any kind of provenance record with more detail, and the answer was no. So, my question, again, trying to write Piatt's biography, is: who had all these family papers? Because if they had these, maybe there are more. There's all kinds of stuff that we don't know yet about Sarah. Who was collecting them, why are they together, and how did they end up in the hands of Howard S. Mott, who then passed them on to Yale in 1954? So, Geoff, you dealt with the guts of that situation so many times in your profession. Could you just share with us any thoughts about how somebody like me would run down a question like that?

GS: Well, having the name Howard S. Mott is a good start, because he was one of *the* great Americana dealers in the country. I mentioned earlier that we got, Ohio State, got its copy of *Modern Chivalry* from him, which was, again, a nice piece of money that Bill Studer? gave us to do it, but you know it's a landmark book to have, if you have American fiction collection. And rare book dealers go to estates when people die, and they sometimes glean things, they sometimes take the entire collection. If it's a significant family, I suspect that Howard Mott probably was brought in to assess and prepare the collection for sale. And maybe he kept those papers separate. He could have been a particular fan himself and gathering from several sources, but it seems to me it's more as if it came from a single estate somewhere.

ER: Okay.

GS: Well, Howard Mott's son, last I knew, knock on wood, is still operating and alive and there might be records with them.

ER: Hey, that's a great idea. I'm going to contact him. Do you know his name?

GS: Ah, escapes my mind right now. But it still operates under, the firm still operates under Howard Mott.

ER: Oh, okay. All right, great.

GS: And I, you know, with the pandemic and all, I don't know what's happened to some of these people. You know, the book fairs have been canceled. You've had to cancel conferences and research visits. I haven't been able to go to the New York Book Fair or anything like that.

ER: Right.

GS: But, for instance, we always got many authors, because we're Ohio, and going back to Sarah Piatt, we do collect Ohio materials. Particularly diaries and journals and that sort of thing. And we would frequently get quotes from dealers in Ohio and beyond with, you know, "Here's a diary of an Ohio soldier from the Civil War, are you interested?" Yeah, sure. And so I

suspect that's probably what it is. That fact that it said—I said it's Mott, Howard Mott—it was part gift that, if he had an affiliation with the Yale University, which he very likely might have, that—

ER: Well, what do you think of the language, "*part* gift?"

GS: That, you know, I have these materials, I'll let you have them for a bargain and then, I'll, you know, you give me some money, and I'll give you more than you're paying. So that, and then they could use it for tax purposes. That's a frequent thing that we did, because in many ways, if you actually—because when you, when a person sells that, they have to declare that as part of their business. If you can actually donate part of it, it actually can almost work out the same, and it benefits both the institution and the dealer. Yeah, I think, you might get some satisfaction, if you—

ER: That's a great idea. I will contact them. And I think the other key piece here might be that—

GS: And I'm going to check that too, for you.

ER: Oh, great. That would be wonderful, thank you. Sarah's last remaining child, Cecil, died in New Jersey in 1949.

GS: Mmhmm.

ER: And so that would, I think, work with your theory about possibly an estate sale. If he had all the family papers upon his death in '49 and then Mott is giving them to Yale in '54.

GS: And he's an East Coast dealer. So, not that, it's not as though—I go to different states to do things, but you know, he was so prominent. I'm sure that they said, "Who can do this?" They said, "Howard Mott."

ER: Good, thank you. That's very helpful. Well, so, Geoff, I want to just publicly thank you for the role you played starting this collection. You know, it's 20 years later, it is the best collection in the world of Sarah Piatt materials related to her life and career. And I remember when you started at all. So, I just want to thank you in public.

GS: It gives me great gratification to know that I did something. [laughs] You know, I've been retired for, it'll six years, now, coming up, so—

ER: Wow. And thank you again for talking to us today. Is there anything that you would like to add in closing about Sarah Piatt's past or future?

GS: I don't think so. I think, well, my major contribution's been the expediter of this, and it's been a pleasure the entire time.

ER: All right, well, Geoff, I'm going to stop recording. And thank you again.

GS: Thank you. And we'll see you.